STRESS, BURNOUT AND GOSPEL

June 5, 1988

11:00 a.m. Worship Service

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Fourth Presbyterian Church, Chicago

Scripture
Matthew 6:25-33

"...do not be anxious about your life."
Matthew 6:25a (RSV)

A young professional in a three-piece suit, apparently late for work, came barreling into a gas station in his BMW, screeched to a halt in front of the pump and yelled, "Can you fill it up? Can you fill it up now?" The attendant was busy and indicated that he would be there in a minute. The young man pounded the steering wheel, yelled that a minute wasn't fast enough and tore back onto the street. Minutes later he was back at the pump, having realized that he wasn't going far on an empty tank. [Newsweek, April 25, 1988, "Stress on the Job."]

That incident was an illustration in a Newsweek cover article in April about stress. It was one of hundreds of similar articles in professional journals and popular magazines recently on the topic of stress and burnout.

Anyone who deals with people: health professionals, bus drivers, waitresses and bank tellers, knows that there is something peculiar going on, something new and unpleasant. We are becoming a stressed-out society. The profession I know best, my own, is deeply concerned about it; both as a pastoral need and as a threat.

"Do not be anxious about your life," Jesus once said. Try telling that to a Lincoln Park yuppie who has just been passed by the fifth consecutive over-crowded CTA bus and who is already late for work. Try it on LaSalle Street tomorrow morning at 8:00 a.m. Or tell it to me, for that matter, when there is more to do than there are hours to do it in and I run across the street to the bank, encounter fifteen people in line and the windows are all empty; the tellers are over in the corner having an amusing discussion, no doubt about how to make life more miserable for customers in a hurry...

"Do not be anxious about your life." It's either one of the silliest things he ever said or one of the most important. It is surely one of the

most relevant. We are acknowledging that stress is real: that much of it is peculiar to this particular time. People have always experienced stress, but at nowhere near the level that has become the norm for us. We know that stress is sometimes creative but mostly it is unhealthy and debilitating. It makes us feel miserable. If it is unresolved it results in a condition called Burnout - which is the collapse of the human spirit, the emptiness which occurs when one has spent-out all one's physical, emotional and spiritual resources. We are learning a lesson that is as old as the human race, namely that the ways to cope with stress and the threat of burnout are often spiritual.

What is stress? A psychologist friend of mine says its "any outside pressure that makes you feel bad inside."

Stress is part of being human. In all of creation, God gave us, alone, the ability to worry, the capacity to imagine the worst and we are experts at it. In his newest book, Fredrick Buechner says telling us not to be anxious is like telling a person with a head cold not to sneeze... "We torment ourselves with detailed visions of the worst that can possibly happen," Buechner observes. "The nagging headache turns out to be a malignant brain tumor. When your teen-age son fails to get off the plane you see his picture tacked-up in the post office among the permanently missing." [Whistling in the Dark, p. 10]

Partially, stress results from a magnificent physical response system designed to protect us called the Fight/Flight response: "a primitive reflex that prepares humans for conflict when confronted with danger... The body secretes adrenaline and hydrocortisone. Hormones turn off some functions including parts of the immune system - and turn on short-term energy reserves." [Newsweek, op. cit., p. 42] It's a wonderful phenomenon. It's our four-alarm, call-out-all-the-troops, ability to react immediately to threats... But - it is not always appropriate. Newsweek observes: "The same mechanism that helped cavemen ward off their predators interferes when a situation calls for a long, sustained response - like driving a car or like putting up with a demanding boss. The trouble is the Fight/Flight response gets triggered in the office... and you can't reach through the phone and strangle the person who set it off."

It not only feels miserable to be stressed, it is very unhealthy. The simple fact is that when you are stressed your digestive system isn't working very efficiently. Those jolts of adrenaline stretch the walls of your arteries and they thicken over time. The cost of stress-related illness is estimated to be 150 billion dollars per year.

What is new and particularly dangerous is that stress now results from our way of life and overwork. "Today's business world has generated corrosive ways to wear down our bodies and spirits," Newsweek observes. Fully three-quarters of Americans say their job causes stress.

A New York Times article reported a major new study of occupation related stress. It described the classic case of a broker on October 19, whose blood pressure and pulse perfectly reflected the drop in stock prices. The more the market fell, the more his pulse and pressure increased. The interesting new discoveries, however, are that top

executives are not as vulnerable to stress as others - particularly those in high demand/low control jobs, that is people who have to produce but have little say in how to produce. A recent study revealed that race car drivers are not nearly as stressed hurtling around the track at 200 m.p.h. as they are in the pit, when the mechanics are in control. The highest risk category of all, it turns out, is mothers and homemakers whose daytime job is high demand/low control, and who then come home to meal preparation, piano lessons and an argument with a husband.

The good news, relatively speaking, is that you are not imagining it. It's not just because you're older, slower and not able to keep up.

In fact, there is more stress about the bad news. The bad news is that it feels terrible, can ruin your relationships, deplete your spirit, render you ineffective, make you sick, and ultimately kill you. So when someone says, "Do not be anxious about your life," for reasons of self-interest, it would seem prudent at least to inquire as to the meaning of his words.

"Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air: they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly father feeds them..."

Jesus was not suggesting that God will deliver a food basket to your front door if you stop worrying. He was not inveighing against owning property or hard work. His father owned a carpenter shop. In all probability Jesus inherited it and worked in it - for eighteen years. "Look at the birds," he said. If you do that with objectivity you will observe that other than stopping on occasion to make music, birds are busy all day long providing for themselves. They may not be fretting about how to pay the VISA bill next month, but neither are they unconcerned about dinner and a place to spend the night. Furthermore, a sad fact is that a lot of birds die. Fully 80% of the robins born every spring don't make it through the season. Birds starve and freeze precisely because they can't worry enough about tomorrow.

What did he mean then? I submit that he was telling them and us, not that we shouldn't worry about anything, but that we ought to worry about important things and let the rest go.

That is how he lived. It was not a superficially cheerful, carefree existence. From the beginning, he was criticized, watched, then hounded and tormented by people whose respect he would have enjoyed. His life was threatened on a number of occasions. Finally, at the end, he alone seems to have understood that the journey was going to end in suffering and death.

When he said "do not be anxious," he was, I believe, bearing witness to the saving truth of his own faith... his own resilient spirit. I like the thought that our Lord knew the same Psalms that we know and love. I like the thought that they sustained and strengthened him. As I thought about this topic, I liked reflecting on the fact that Jesus knew, perhaps by heart, the Psalm we would read together in worship. And that perhaps he thought about it as he faced the last days of his life.

"...in the shadow of thy wings I will
take refuge...
I lie in the midst of lions...
My heart is steadfast...
For thy steadfast love is
great to the heavens..."
[Psalm 57]

I like to reflect on the possibility that he was recalling that Psalm and testifying to the truth he had experienced in his own life - when he said: "Do not be anxious for your life." God knows your needs. Trust God. Seek God's kingdom first and all these things will be yours.

There are ways to cope with stress. One of the best is to seek help. There are many resources available. Many businesses and professional organizations offer stress management workshops. We do know a lot about the topic. To understand the dynamics of stress is at least to have behavioral options. It helps to know, for instance, that when you are in the middle of a traffic jam on the expressway and going to be late for a meeting, that your mounting impatience and sense of impotence is, as a matter of fact, taking a physiological toll: Your body is busy, preparing for battle, pumping adrenaline you don't need, manufacturing perspiration that is not required to cool you for combat; sending blood away from your stomach to your biceps. It helps to know that you're essentially doing that to yourself. It's no wonder you have indigestion and feel awful later.

Coping mechanisms include dietary changes, exercise, learning deep breathing techniques, meditation and humor. It helps a lot to take yourself less seriously and to be able to laugh. Dr. Steve Allen, son of the entertainer, is in the stress management business; teaches busy executives to be able to laugh at themselves and says, "In laughter there is healing power."

I'm intrigued by the spiritual implications and the fact that religiously oriented or not, stress consultants seem to agree that something like prayer and meditation is the best therapy of all. But what really caught my attention was something the psychologists and stress experts call "perceptual restructuring." Newsweek said that's a fancy way of saying "don't sweat the small stuff." I think "perceptual restructuring" sounds an awful lot like spiritual conversion; turning around, seeing everything differently.

It is what Jesus meant, I believe, when he said - "do not be anxious about tomorrow... seek first God's kingdom and all these things will be yours as well."

As a matter of fact, when you have the big matters resolved, the little ones do become easier. Or, better said, when you have the big ones resolved, you know that all the rest are small and ultimately manageable.

So what Jesus said could save you - which is what the Gospel is. Worry about what's really important: yourself, your ultimate meaning as a person, your values, your commitments, your relationship with your

Creator. Seek that first and everything else will fall into place - because when you seek God's kingdom a miracle happens. It's called Grace. You discover that you are loved.

The most powerful commentary on this text that I know of, is a brief section in Dietrich Bonhoeffer's, The Cost of Discipleship. Bonhoeffer wrote with directness and strength...

> "The life of discipleship can only be maintained as long as nothing is allowed to come between Christ and ourselves..."

That's a very demanding statement. The first time I read it I thought it too pious, too rigid, too unreal. I almost resented it. How could anyone do that - when our responsibilities include family, mortgage, work? But it has haunted me across the years, as it has the countless modern Christians who have been influenced by Bonhoeffer. I have pondered not only its theological power but the way he lived it out. A few years after he wrote it he would be arrested, imprisoned and executed by the Nazis. Almost prophetically, he wrote:

> "Be not anxious for tomorrow... is not to be taken as a philosophy of life or a moral law: it is the Gospel of Jesus Christ... [p. 159]

> "After he has been following Christ for a long time, the disciple of Jesus will be asked, 'Lacked ye anything?' and he will answer, 'Nothing, Lord.' How could he when he knows that despite hunger and nakedness, persecution and danger, the Lord is always at his side." [p. 161]

When you seek God's kingdom and you give your life to it, you make a wonderful discovery. You are safe. You are ultimately safe from anything that can do you harm. There is nothing that can separate you from God's love and, therefore, there is nothing ultimately to worry about.

"Perceptual Restructuring" ... "Do not be anxious about your life... Seek God's kingdom and God's righteousness, and all these things shall be yours as well."

Hear that this morning as an invitation to trust Jesus Christ with your life. Turn around and see things from a new perspective. Loosen your tight grip, breath deeply and allow the one who created you and loves you to give you the gifts you need.

He promises to save your life. Trust him.

Amen.